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Gallery-Going

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Many modern painters experience a conversion at some point in their artistic lives. For Stephen Greene (1917–99), it came in the late 1950s, when he switched from Renaissance-inspired scenes with religious subjects to abstraction. But as these lyrically Expressionist works from his final decades show, his paintings retained not only occasional references to real objects but also a persistent desire to communicate the spiritual.

The artist made fluent use of every standard tool of painterly expression. His vivid hues run the gamut, with bright pinks, violets, and oranges set against more nuanced fields of color. His evocative surfaces range from veiled glazes to vigorous scumblings and sleek impastos. His gestures are free, though apparently sometimes premeditated, as some strokes outline earlier ones with more intense hues. Sketchy, cryptic images of flowers or human skulls appear in several paintings.

“Expulsion No. 13” (1984) is an especially muscular canvas: Great orange strokes arch over the top, separated by

only a small, brilliant, yellow oval. In “Rite of Quietude” (1991), a large area of variegated grays compresses other gestures into half the canvas, imparting potent contrasts of scale. Other compositions are less climactic, their forms gliding smoothly through the rectangle of the canvas; in these, the artist’s elegant control and handsome surfaces lend a vaguely decorative air.

The paintings contain dark passages, but they never feel dark; the artist’s brushstrokes are sometimes ragged but never raw, his surfaces evocative but never intrusive. That is to say, there’s a certain prudence in Greene’s means, in contrast to the exaltation or ominous finality suggested by such titles as “Pleasure Dome,” “Expulsion No. 5,” and “Evidence.”

No matter: The artist has ably used the idioms, if not the urgency, of Abstract Expressionism in the cause of beautiful mark-making. The results are lusciously well-rounded.